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Theater Review

Email Shapes @Heart

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The stage is empty except for two tables, two chairs, and two white laptops on the tables. After the Nirvana song "All Apologies" plays, the actors, a woman and a man, enter and take their seats. He reads a diary-like email describing a sad incident he saw while stationed in Afghanistan. She stares out at the audience and says, "I am surrounding you with a bubble of love and protection."

That's the beginning of @*Heart*, a play now at the Ruskin Group Theatre. It's the work of playwright J-Powers, who has written a number of plays about political themes. @*Heart* is his examination of the effect war has on relationships and families. The conflict in this play is recent, involving a young man from Santa Monica who enlists after 9/11 because he believes he must defend our country. But the effects of his decision are timeless and universal.

@*Heart* is being performed with three rotating casts, and for the performance attended by this reviewer the parts of Harris and Jen, the young couple separated by war, were played by J-Teddy Garces and Amanda Martindale. Their task as actors seems deceptively simple - they sit at the tables, laptops open in front of them, and read out loud the e-mails and IMs that they exchange over a period of about 18 months, from the time Harris enlists in boot camp to the beginning of the conflict in Iraq.

But there is so much going on and so much emotion behind these brief communiqués that the epistolary format evolves into a real, two-character play. It is a series of dialogues between a wife and husband, by turns funny, lusty, affectionate, urgent, proud, angry, embittered, frantic, and sad. Despite the static staging, one can often visualize the actions behind the words as Jen tells Harris about her pregnancy and how her clothes are refusing to fit, as Harris describes the way he survives a Taliban attack, as the couple learn secrets about each other even while geographically separated.

Between "scenes," images and text projected on a screen behind the actors tell us what events are happening in the world at the time of each e-mail exchange. Harris and Jen do not discuss these events - except for a brief allusion to the "Twin Towers," they could be caught up in any war. And for most of the play, Harris is stationed in places where he is not in physical danger. But that situation changes - Harris is sent to Afghanistan, then to Pakistan. By that time, Jen is fighting a war of her own as her personal world is falling apart.

Director Paul Linke, well-known for his own play about family tragedy *Time Flies When You're Alive*, has a natural feel for this material. Faced with the task of directing two actors who have to remain seated, Linke uses them to maximum effect for what can be wrung from their facial expressions and body language, as well as the wide range of vocal shadings. Each cast, of course, brings a somewhat different interpretation to the roles. In the performance seen, Garces is quite credible as the strong-looking young man whose pride and outer veneer of cockiness are slowly stripped away by both Army experience and the news about his wife's problems. Martindale initially comes across as a perky beach girl, but by the play's end, her character is anything but perky. Both actors, while young, give performances that are worthy of more mature players.

@*Heart* plays Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. (no performances December 21-30), through January 20.